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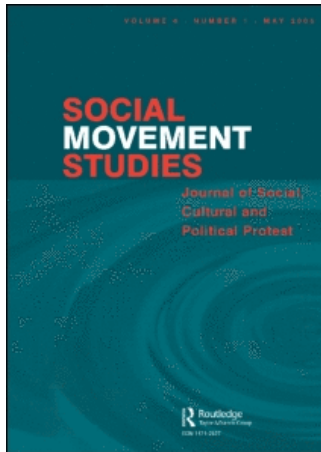
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#### Protest, Cyberactivism and New Social Movements: The Reemergence of the Peace Movement Post 9/11

Victoria Carty<sup>a</sup>; Jake Onyett<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA

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# Protest, Cyberactivism and New Social Movements: The Reemergence of the Peace Movement Post 9/11

VICTORIA CARTY & JAKE ONYETT

Chapman University, Orange, CA, USA

**ABSTRACT** *This paper examines ways in which the Internet and alternative forms of media have enhanced the global, yet grassroots, political mobilization in the anti-war effort in the post 9/11 environment. An examination of the role of cyberactivism in the peace movement enhances our understanding of social movements and contentious politics by analyzing how contemporary social movements are using advanced forms of technology and mass communication as a mobilizing tool and a conduit to alternative forms of media. These serve as both a means and target of protest action and have played a critical role in the organization and success of internal political mobilizing.*

**KEY WORDS:** Cyberactivism, globalization, social movements, war on terrorism, contentious politics, political opportunity structures

## Introduction

Recent social movement theory has begun to recognize the implications of globalizing trends and how they affect collective action (Smith *et al.*, 1997; Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Della Porta *et al.*, 1999). Smith & Johnston (2002) argue that since globalization brings with it substantial changes in the types of contemporary social relations, the ways that people engage in collective political action are transformed as well. One defining feature of the growing number of transnational movements is that they tend to frame, interpret and attribute their grievances to global issues, including global standards of justice. Perhaps one of the most notable arenas in which this is demonstrated is in the contemporary peace movement. Though rarely victorious in preventing war, activist mobilization can change public opinion, influence policymakers to change their goals, and/or undermine the institutional or political infrastructure that supports war-making (Marullo & Meyer, 2004). Thus, success is not measured in terms of the achievement of absolute concrete goals or concessions from those in power, but rather a transformation of consciousness and a source of moral vision and voice.

Contemporary social movements are using advanced forms of technology and mass communication as a mobilizing tool and conduit to alternative forms of media. These serve

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*Correspondence Address:* Victoria Carty, Assistant Professor of Sociology, Chapman University, Orange, CA 92866, USA. Phone: (714) 774- 2137; Email: carty@chapman.edu

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as both a means and target of protest action (Carty, 2002; McCaughey & Ayers, 2003), and have played a crucial role in the organization and success of international political mobilizing. Recent technological changes have facilitated the development of a number of independent, non-profit public interest media sites on the World Wide Web (WWW) that advocate social and economic justice. New outlets for the underrepresented in mainstream media allow for alternatives to corporate media controlled by profit, and give ordinary citizens access to information, resources and opportunities for communication. They also assist groups and individuals worldwide to forge links across a wide range of issues.

This paper examines ways in which the Internet and alternative forms of media have enhanced the global, yet grassroots political mobilization in the anti-war effort in the post 9/11 environment. This includes not only the US-led 'war on terrorism' but also, more specifically, the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq. US President George W. Bush has often said that the war on terrorism is a war without borders. Many would argue that the WWW is the first medium without borders (Stengel, 2001). The effectiveness of coordinated global protests, organized and designed primarily through online efforts in a transnational push for peace, affirms the words of Dr Robert Muller, who is the former assistant secretary-general of the United Nations. He states: 'Now there are two superpowers: the US and the merging voice of the people of the world. All around the world, people are waging peace. It is nothing short of a miracle and it is working – despite what you may see unfolding in the news' (Hoge, 2004). Concerned citizens around the world are increasingly linking their online efforts to one another to form a coordinated online movement that offers alternative journalism and unique mobilizing strategies. The current anti-war movement's repertoire illustrates that new forms of technology are redefining political struggle by providing the resources and environment necessary for cohesive organized resistance to war.

An examination of the role of cyberactivism in the peace movement enhances our understanding of social movements and contentious politics. In this analysis, we specifically focus on how the Internet serves as a central means of communicating grievances, sharing and expanding communication across various transnational constituencies, and ultimately increases the interconnectedness and consciousness of groups and individuals on a global scale. Our analysis combines aspects of new social movement theory with some of the more classical strands of social movement theory, such as political opportunity structure (POS) and resource mobilization, to consider how groups at the grassroots level utilize new resources in the context of globalization to counteract the war effort.

### **Globalizing Trends, Technological Change and New Social Movements**

The contemporary era can be characterized as one undergoing an intensified process of globalization, understood in terms of economic, political, cultural and technological change (Dicken, 1998; Sklair, 1998). The technical revolution that began in the 1970s and the related economic, cultural and political developments have contributed to an intensification of both concrete global interdependence and a consciousness of the global whole (Castells, 1989; Giddens, 1990). The increasing sense of mutual interdependence due to enhanced globalization, combined with the means for communicating across vast geographic distances, has proven effective in producing new forms of cultural and political solidarity and understanding of international norms (Ross, 1999; Smith, 2002).

Because social life and social relations are increasingly constituted on a global scale, recent forms of mobilization have taken on a new dynamic. Advances in mass media, information systems and technology have radically changed the nature of political, subjective and everyday life. As Mark Poster (1995) points out, the recent technological advances have 'enabled a system of multiple producers, distributors and consumers to use decentralized and newly accessible media technologies in everyday practices' (p. 5). He further states, 'When users have decentralized, distributed, direct control over when, what, why, and with whom they exchange information . . . it seems to breed critical thinking, activism, democracy and equality . . . This electronically mediated communication can challenge systems of domination' (pp. 28, 57). The Internet is thus potentially more persuasive and effective in diffusing social ideas and actions within a global community of interest than any other communication technology in history (Castells, 2001).

Accompanying the emergence of 'post-industrial' societies, in which advanced technology and service-based economies are centrifugal, has been the rise of 'new' social movements (NSMs). NSMs are based on identity-issues and operate at the grassroots level. These are differentiated from previous, or 'old', movements that focused exclusively on class-based issues at the structural level (for a detailed analysis of this comparison see Della Porta & Diani, 1999; Buechler, 2000). Over the past several years social movement theorists have embraced these NSMs as a critical area of study. New social movement theorists recognize that identity is fluid and multiple (Johnston *et al.*, 1994; Melucci, 1996). The cultural strand of NSM theory focuses on the decentralized nature of both power and resistance, and emphasizes cultural and symbolic expressions that challenge forms of domination. Melucci (1996) holds that participants in NSMs do not necessarily seek material gain, but attempt to challenge the diffuse notions of politics and of society themselves. The political version of NSM theory is partial to a macro-level analysis, and updates and revises Marxist assumptions to assess the connections between advanced capitalism and the emergence of NSMs. It retains a concern with strategic questions and instrumental action as the ultimate goals of social movements (Brecher *et al.*, 2002). As articulated by Langman (2005), 'although general social movements still pursue traditionally conceived social and political goals, more paramount to NSMs is the construction and legitimization of collective identities for coherence and to articulate resistance' (p. 8). Similarly, Diani (1992) argues that the essential components of NSMs consist of networks of relations between a plurality of actors, a sense of collective identity, and shared conflictual issues. He suggests that a focus on intermediate structures of collective action can refine our understanding of the link between macro explanations that focus on structural changes and micro explanations that focus on individual attitudes and behaviors.

The mission of NSMs is to make issues such as equity, dignity, well-being and sustainability as important as profitability and capital accumulation, and to ultimately create a global civic movement (Evans, 2000). Chesters & Welsh's (2002) analysis of the Alternative People's Global Action (PGA) is demonstrative of how a global civil society may operate, in that it has 'managed to carve out new democratic spaces in which to deliberate on complex global problems' (p. 3). Tomlinson (1999) describes this process as one of 'distanciated identity,' whereby individuals embrace a sense of what unites us as human beings, of common risks and possibilities, and of mutual responsibility. These NSMs are indicative of an increased consciousness that embraces a global and compassionate perspective. Identity politics (in a global formation) are

seen as the most fruitful means of resisting all forms of injustices within the global system (Sklair, 1998). This entails establishing global networks of people with similar identities and interests, outside the control of the national and state and local authorities.

Because the ties between new social movement actors are flexible, participants are able to reach wide and heterogeneous audiences that can organize from different angles to form broad coalitions across various movement domains (Rucht, 1999). Keck & Sikkink (1998) refer to the recent forms of resistance as 'transnational advocacy networks' (TANs). The strategy is to link activists in less-developed countries with more empowered political actors and groups that have more leverage in influencing decisions regarding global political and economic dynamics. Through transnational networking, activists employ grassroots mobilization from below to try to modify the institutional forms of organized globalization from above.

### **Mobilizing Strategies and Political Opportunity Structures**

McAdam, McCarthy & Zald define mobilizing strategies as 'those collective vehicles, informal as well as formal, through which people mobilize and engage in collective action' (1996, p. 3). The success or failure of these strategies is influenced by the available political opportunity structures (POS) at the specific historical juncture, which either constrain or provide incentives for collective action (Tarrow, 2001). Activists strategize to take advantage of new opportunities created by emerging social structures with novel forms of collective action.

There are a number of push factors that can help build momentum within a movement. In the peace movement, one of the primary POS activists have used is to seize the opportunity to exploit clashes among elites. President Bush's difficulty in obtaining substantial international support to form a credible 'coalition of the willing' has resulted in a clash between elites on a national and global scale. There is neither widespread support among politicians in the US to 'go it alone', nor a broad international consensus that preemptive strikes or unilaterally declared wars without the approval of the United Nations are legal or moral. In fact, Secretary-General Kofi Annan recently told the BBC's Owen Bennett Jones that the invasion was 'illegal' (Online [bbc.co.uk](http://bbc.co.uk)). International relations were also damaged when US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld referred to France and Germany as the 'old' Europe when they refused to participate in the coalition (Peel *et al.*, 2003). Finally, the statements regarding the United Nations as irrelevant when it refused to authorize the war reduced the overwhelming international sympathy and support the US enjoyed immediately following the 9/11 attack (Woodward, 2004).

This discrepancy among international elites has encouraged and reinforced a multilateral approach to the anti-war struggle. This strategy makes states more vulnerable to activists because it creates new spaces in which to question state agendas, draw international attention to domestic practices and create alliances with powerful actors outside the domestic political arena (Smith, 2002). Several governments, including Canada and Germany, have refrained from joining the coalition of the willing in the war against terrorism and/or have pulled their troops from Iraq. Spain, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Philippines, Norway, Poland, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Thailand, Moldavia, Bulgaria and Hungary – 15 of the original 32 of the coalition – have either left or have plans to depart from Iraq. Also, Japan is trying to limit its troops to non-combat roles (Hayden, 2004).

Whether there is a direct causal relationship between pressure on governments and the lack of international support for the war is difficult to determine, but there is indeed a pattern that warrants consideration of a potential relationship.

Although preemptive rallies didn't prevent the war on Iraq, or convince all nations to reject joining the coalition, they did affect the agenda for waging it and forced governments to recognize the need to be cautious about the heavy political price (Kugiya, 2003). Though these may only be small steps in the larger struggle, when activists effectively shape individual state decisions, international campaigns have a better chance of changing international policy (Smith, 2002). Furthermore, Annan's continued reluctance to commit staff workers to Iraq, and his unsuccessful attempts at persuading countries to contribute troops to protect UN workers in the summer of 2004 was due, according to Annan, to the fact that governments '...are concerned about the security situation, and they probably have their own public opinion and parliaments to convince' (Hoge, 2004).

Again, though a definitive causal relationship cannot be determined, this statement and recent actions of several governments seem to support the claims of some of the POS theorists regarding the ability of activists to take advantage of rifts between elites to further their cause. These events also support the work of Gamson (1990) who measures successful outcomes of contentious politics as either the realization of challengers' goals, and/or the challengers being recognized as a legitimate representation of a constituency by the target of collective action, and thereby altering the relationship between the challengers and the target it attempts to influence. If governments are indeed acquiescing to public pressure, then clearly the balance of power has shifted in many countries.

These dynamics further underpin the work of Marks & McAdam (1996) who argue that while nation-states remain a focus, challengers face an emerging system of multi-level governance, whereby the relations among states become resources or obstacles to movement goals. The US policy on the Iraq war and the war on terrorism depend on support from international allies, and most importantly Britain. Growing antagonistic relations among states regarding support of US policy allows citizens to use tension among governments as a mobilizing tool. For example, the recent bombings in London, which many speculate were due to anger over Prime Minister Tony Blair's support of the US invasion of Iraq, the assassination of Egypt's ambassador to Iraq (one of the two countries in the Middle East to officially recognize the new Iraqi government), and the Istanbul bombing that was directed against British targets synchronized with a meeting of Bush and Blair, are examples of how intra-state relations can potentially serve as a mobilizing resource for activists. Additionally, Smith (2002) argues that states can at times serve as movement allies on particular issues or promote their strategic interests by aligning themselves with movement opposition to other governments' policies. In the anti-war movement, France, Germany and other countries that refused to join or have pulled out of the coalition of the willing can potentially strengthen the protestors' position and at the same time gain support from the activists for their critique of US foreign policy.

Activists have also taken advantage of POS by increasing public anxieties regarding the high cost of the war and future risks of further terrorist attacks due to the war on terrorism and invasion of Iraq. As the cost of war increases both in terms of finances and human casualties, the state's legitimation becomes more difficult to uphold and consequently activists can draw in new recruits and build support for their position (Marullo & Meyer, 2004). The apparent miscalculations and consequent growing dissatisfaction among the general public have jeopardized the legitimacy of states, giving activists additional space



and opportunities to voice their grievances. In Iraq, the financial costs have risen to \$4 billion a month for the US (Strange, 2004), the loss of American lives is well over 1,800 since the declared end of the war, and historical steadfast alliances have disintegrated. The escalating casualties of US forces, the lack of an achievable goal and/or exit strategy, the exposure of the erroneous reports of weapons of mass destruction (and the therefore purported need for self protection from an imminent attack against the US), have all helped to strengthen opposition to the war.

### **Framing and Collective ID**

Mobilizing efforts must also proactively create pull factors. To do so, activists must diagnose social problems in a way that resonates with others to recruit new members and to solidify a sense of collective identity (Snow & Benford, 1988). Melucci (1996) argues that collective identities emerge within an interactive process in which social networks define their values, the meanings of their actions and fields of opportunities. Jasper & Polletta (2001) define collective identity as 'a perception of a shared status or relationship, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and is distinct from personal identities' (p. 248). According to Gamson (1991), movement identities refer to the association of the goals and values of a movement with one's own, and solidarity identities involve the inclusion of the individual or group in a wider community of fate.

Recent scholarship on NSMs has focused on how emotional bonds between activists help to forge and sustain collective identity (Klandermans, 1994; Melucci, 1996). Goodwin, Jasper & Polletta (2001) suggest that when people experience feelings of moral indignation, disrespect and anger they participate in social movements to not only enforce policy change, but perhaps more importantly, to gain dignity. Much of this is rooted in feelings of compassion, indignation and moral shock, and may occur due to direct or indirect experiences. They argue that the transnational movements against sweatshops, the World Trade Organization or the US war against Iraq would not have become so broad and able to recruit so many people without such feelings and emotions.

Key to forging collective identity is how organizers 'frame' their issues in a way that resonates with potential recruits by linking participants' grievances to mainstream beliefs and values in the hopes of influencing public opinion and events (Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford, 1993). To mobilize support, organizers must create simple and concise yet broad movement goals to attract diverse constituencies – an organizing strategy characterized by a 'master frame' (Snow & Benford, 1992; Benford, 1993). Gamson (1992) argues that for a frame to go from understanding to motivating action it must have the elements of injustice, identity and agency. Acting collectively requires the development of solidarity and an oppositional consciousness that allows a challenging group to identify common injustices, to oppose those injustices, and to define a shared interest in opposing the dominant group or resisting the system of authority responsible for those injustices (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2003).

Framing is also critical in establishing cross-national networks of activists. By facilitating flows of information across national borders, organizations with transnational ties can help cultivate movement identities, shape new activist frames, transcend nationally defined interests and build solidarity with a global emphasis (Gamson, 1991;

Smith, 2002). Keck & Sikkink (1998) perhaps most accurately describe these types of mobilizing strategies in their work on TANs. They note the emergence of organizations that are voluntary, and through which there are 'reciprocal and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange', operating beyond national boundaries and motivated primarily by shared principled ideas or values. These are based on informal types of action and the actors involved may include NGOs as well as local social movements, the media, churches, trade unions, consumer organizations, intellectuals, parts of regional and international governmental organizations, and parts of the executive and/or parliamentary branches of governments' (1998, pp. 8, 30).

One of the primary goals of TANs is to create, strengthen, implement and monitor international norms (Khagram & Sikkink, 2002). These international norms are sometimes part of the resources POS actors use to draw others to the cause and to develop their collective beliefs. Preexisting international norms can thus act as pull factors to facilitate the emergence and growth of the TANs by legitimating local grievances. When social movement actors build on already existing norms to expand the domain to which these norms apply, it is called 'frame bridging' (Snow & Benford, 1988). This can also draw others to a cause in that the appeal for justice is put forth in a much more generalized sense. For example, by framing preemptive war as a human rights issue, the peace movement was able to attract several diverse groups and individuals that share a similar vision but work on different social justice campaigns.

Activist groups such as ANSWER (Act Now to Stop the War & End Racism) have utilized frame bridging by referring to the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, 78 U.N.T.S. 277, which was executed in 1948 and ratified by the US. 'This carries with it the binding force of the law of nations and prohibits genocide or complicity in genocide. This includes acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or part, a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group by various means' (Online answer.org). ANSWER argues that under the premise of international law the Iraqi war therefore qualifies as a criminal war.

As alternative, transnational networks, coalitions and movements may attempt to transform their collective beliefs into international norms (Khagram & Sikkink, 2002). NGOs and other transnational advocates use information, persuasion and moral pressure to change international institutions and governments. They do this by displaying or publicizing norm-breaking behavior to embarrass neglectful political officials to get them to conform to norms – using what is referred to as the 'mobilization of shame'. In the peace movement, numerous protest and other mobilizing strategies emphasize the need for the creation of clear international standards that can be *enforced* regarding the legality of war.

By framing their claims globally, peace activists were able to engage transnational networks, coalitions and NGOs in local struggles as various groups across the globe coalesced in opposition to the anticipated and then subsequent military intervention in Iraq. One of the key allies in the peace movement has been the global justice movement (often referred to as the anti-globalization movement) (Milstein, 2003; Solomon, 2004). The 1999 Battle of Seattle caught the media's and the public's attention, revealing a broad and diverse opposition to the recent expansion of neoliberal global economic policies (Brecher *et al.*, 2002; Danaher & Burbach, 2000; Starr, 2000). The key questions challengers in the global justice movement are asking are: how the global economy should be governed, who should govern it, and whose interest it should serve across economic, political, social and cultural dimensions (Faux, 2002). The contention is based on the fact that trade agreements



tend to be controlled by the elites from nations that dominate the international institutions such as the World Trade Organization, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Thus, a wide and heterogeneous range of social movements have coalesced to challenge the agenda that protects the interests of foreign investors and the mobility of capital at the expense of the environment and labor and human rights (Basu, 2001; Connell, 2001). Though the assorted coalitions that make up the global justice movement have different agendas, strategies and goals, these interconnected movements and networks collectively concentrate on negotiating democratic space to incorporate values other than profit-making into global economic institutions (Chesters & Welsh, 2002).

To further broaden the appeal of the movement, organizers have made a concerted effort to build coalitions across diverse constituencies to include not only the radical left, which predominated the protest against the Vietnam War, but to also embrace members of mainstream society, including those that have historically identified with the conservative agenda (Harris, 2003). Cress & Snow (2000) suggest that for challengers to have an impact they must identify problems and pose solutions in a way that not only mobilizes participants but that also appeals to third parties. Because the current anti-war movement is not part of a counterculture, it has enjoyed greater credibility than the Vietnam protestors and has increased its ability to attract more support (Leland, 2003). The contemporary movement has also avoided the discriminating aspect of the anti-Vietnam War mobilization that invariably rejected the very people trying to be countered (Leland, 2003; Milstein, 2003). (For a detailed analysis of the anti-Vietnam War mobilization, see Schriber, 1973 and Rooney, 2003.) In contrast, the re-emerging global peace movement, like the Battle of Seattle, seeks unity in its differences, largely by means of a shared oppositional consciousness in a collective struggle for global justice and a respect for human rights (Chesters & Welsh, 2002).

### **Repertoires and Resource Mobilization**

Repertoires allude to the choices activists have within structured options (Tilly, 1978). Peace activists have historically utilized a wide range of repertoires including conventional political activity, consciousness raising, moral persuasion, civil disobedience, violence, sabotage and self-immolation (Marullo & Meyer, 2004). One of the most common repertoires for the peace movement has been street protests and rallies. These types of protests are effective in that they dramatize the legitimacy, unity, numbers and commitment of groups supporting the social movement goals (Klandermans, 1997; McAdam, Tarrow & Tilly, 2001). They also help to consolidate activist identities among new recruits and long-term members by dramatizing conflict and creating 'us-versus-them' identities as they develop an oppositional consciousness (McAdam, 1988; Gamson, 1992; Jasper, 1997). The power of protest mobilization as an expression of public opinion was evident on 15 February 2003 (F15), when protests were coordinated simultaneously in dozens of countries. The British-based Stop the War Coalition served as an umbrella organization that networked with the Socialist Workers Party, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the anti-capitalist organization Globalized Resistance, Labor Party legislators, trade unions and a large portion of the British Muslim community. This was the largest coordinated political protest ever (Alexander, 2003), and was one of a series of demonstrations organized by the Stop The War Coalition before and after the US-led invasion of Iraq. Two million people took to the streets to protest in central London and estimates ranged as high as 15 million

people across 75 countries (Milstein, 2003). This demonstrated the effectiveness of global solidarity, voluntary cooperation and grassroots protest as thousands of independent yet interconnected groups coordinated into a powerful form of opposition.

The success was also in part due to the simplicity of how the message was framed – the war was unjust – and was depicted by the rallying universal call: ‘The World Says No to War’. Following the protest, the *New York Times* described the global peace movement as ‘the world’s second superpower’, and it was after this global demonstration that governments of nine countries backed out of arrangements to support the US war against terrorism (Packer, 2003). Again, it is too broad a claim to assert that there was a direct causal effect, but the fact remains that several governments did indeed change their position regarding support of the invasion of Iraq following the demonstrations.

Since F15 numerous events, protests and coordinated actions have taken place to capitalize on the momentum of the protest. In November 2003, 200,000 protested in Trafalgar Square when President Bush made a state visit to the United Kingdom (Agence French Press, 2004). In March 2004, on the first anniversary of the Iraq invasion, over 25,000 organized a street protest in London to contest Blair’s decision to closely align with the US in the war against terrorism. In October 2004, tens of thousands again returned to Trafalgar Square to stage a rally amid speculation that Britain was to concede to American requests for a redeployment of British troops from Southern Iraq to Baghdad or Fallujah (Agence French Press, 2004). Though Blair’s policies did not change, the display of overwhelming shared grievances regarding them drew vast media attention and served as an outlet for citizens to solidify their collective identity in opposition to their government’s decisions.

Global witnessing is another key tactical strategy utilized by the contemporary peace movement. It allows for a pedagogical style that increases awareness about the global context of social problems and helps to create solidarity across borders through public civic education. Fernando Suarez del Solar, who lost his son in the Iraqi war, is one of the most prominent speakers critiquing the war. He traveled to Iraq with San Francisco-based NGO Global Exchange and several military families. He now travels internationally to expose what he feels to be the many lies surrounding the war effort (Online Global Exchange.org). Robert Sarra, a veteran of the Iraq war, has also become an anti-war activist despite his perception of protesters as hippies who, in his eyes during the Vietnam War protest movement, had ‘no right to protest and just hated the military’ (Chaudry, 2004). He is now the co-founder of Iraq Veterans Against the War and travels across the US to raise awareness of the grim realities of the war.

His comments represent the importance of framing grievances in general terms that appeal to an overall sense of justice, and how increasing awareness of injustice based on first-hand experience can solidify opposition across party lines. He states:

What I’ve been doing, though, is to stay non-partisan. I’ve been doing that because people have got to remember that this isn’t something political. There are both Democrats and Republicans with kids over there fighting . . . for the guys over there, politics isn’t a factor to them. It’s about fighting for that guy next to you and getting home in one piece and getting back to your family (Chaudry, 2004).

This type of global witnessing from soldiers returning from war helps to humanize the conflict and gives legitimacy to the protesters on the basis of the veterans’ personal and first-hand experience in Iraq. This resonates with NSM theories that explain how

movements recruit new members. Through educational venues, activists can raise citizen awareness without directly experiencing war. In this way global witnessing can serve as a mobilizing tactic to help draw in third parties due to the legitimacy of the speakers.

### *Cyberactivism: Theoretical Overview*

One of the more novel repertoires and resource mobilization outlets for the peace movement has been cyberactivism. Several social movement theorists have examined the social and political ramifications of information communication technology (ICT) regarding its impact on the nature of communication, social relations and the political process (Castells, 2001; Norris, 2001; Meikle, 2002; Pickerill, 2003). Many in fact argue that the novel intricacies of the ICT-driven 'network society' require a fundamental re-conceptualization of social mobilization (Castells, 1997; Urry, 2000; Kellner, 2004). According to Langman (2005, p.47), a contemporary theory of NSMs must consider:

the central role of electronic media and global networks in enabling virtual public spheres; the crises of legitimacy and impacts of economic, political, cultural and ecological aspects of neo-liberal globalization; the migration of these crises to realms of identity and motivation and emergent forms of progressive project identities that would seek to transform the social; and finally, the extent to which inter-networked movements, more as flows than organizations, are fundamentally different than earlier social movements.

Michael Mann (2000) describes how new solutions to social problems are developing in what he calls 'interstitial locations'. These consist of the 'nooks and crannies in and around the dominant institutions'. He argues that groups that are marginal and blocked by the prevailing institutions can link together and cooperate in ways that transcend these institutions. Such movements create 'subversive invisible connections across state boundaries and the established channels between them...these interstitial networks translate human goals into organizational means' (p. 13). The Internet and electronic political activism, in conjunction with grassroots mobilization, illustrates the effectiveness of such interstitial locations.

There are, however, mixed views on the potential advantages of new communication technologies. On the one hand, many NSM theorists point to some of the utopian aspects. For example, Kellner (2004) and Langman (2005) argue that the current mobilization against neo-liberal globalization, increasingly mediated across electronic networks, allows unprecedented opportunities for the exchange of information outside the control of the dominant media corporations. Others describe the emerging virtual community and social relations as decentralized, democratic, diverse, heterogeneous, fluid, open, informal and in many ways self-governing (Rheingold, 1993; Kollock & Smith, 1999; Meikle, 2002; Pickerill, 2003).

Information on the Internet, not necessarily available in the mainstream press, and coming from alternative sources that otherwise may not be heard, enhances the resources available to actors in social and political struggles (Meikle, 2002; Pickerill, 2003). This can lead to rapid, creative and universal action among activists, organized through non-hierarchical channels, who may be geographically and/or socially diverse, but who share common interests, concerns, goals, tactics and strategies (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Kollock &

Smith, 1999; Pickerill, 2003; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2003). The Internet also serves as a virtual public sphere that fosters fluid and salient collective identities and can lead to actual protest and strengthen transnational advocacy networks (Castells, 1997; Rheingold, 2002; Langman *et al.*, 2003). Langman sees little distinction between communities organized in cyberspace and those that require face-to-face relationships because in either environment individuals exchange information as well as debate and negotiate interpretations of reality and/or critique social issues.

Wellman (2000) describes the organizational, personal and cultural diversity of cyberactivism as 'networked individualism' – the ease of establishing personal links that enable people to join more diverse and numerous online political communities than they would ordinarily join in the material world. Others advocate that the Internet allows a high degree of coordination between movement networks to gain support from previously dormant sectors and develop common frames of meaning (Scott & Street, 2000; Gerhards & Rucht, 2002). The global nature of web resistance can also give activists the sense that they are part of a larger movement, making it inherently democratic, regardless of the user's nationality (Ayres, 2002; Kahney, 2003). Other theorists note how cyberactivism facilitates contentious politics. For example, Meikle (2002) and Jordan & Taylor (2004) examine how culture jamming, file-swapping, share-ware and hacktivism can serve a novel repertoires in political struggle and online politics. Meikle also discusses how activists are applying traditional strategies and tactics to the new media environment, such as online petitions, sit-ins and strikes.

On the other hand, many of these same authors acknowledge that a more critical analysis of electronic mediated information systems reveals a number of limitations as well. Although computer networks create new social spaces in which individuals meet and interact in virtual landscapes, many argue that they are not a substitute for more traditional forms of community, protest and collective identity (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Meikle, 2002; Pickerill, 2003; Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2003; Rheingold, 2002). In fact, new technologies can serve as obstacles to building stronger, more human communities in that it is the ability of a group to develop strong interpersonal ties that provides the basis for the consistency of collective identities. Also, the plurality of often-competing organizations, goals and orientations can lead to fragmentation and difficulty establishing a united front (Langman, 2005). Ribeiro (1998) explains: 'trust, friendship, reputation, predictability, hierarchical position within a network and even charisma are elements of political activity that certainly cannot be reduced to technologies of communication' (p. 341). Pickerill further warns that although computer mediated systems (CMS) can strengthen and maintain existing networks, in order to mobilize new members personal forms of interaction are required.

There are also concerns about elite domination over cyberspace and the pragmatic problem of access to the technology (Jordan, 2001; Langman, 2005). Global commerce, new oligopolies, surveillance, retaliation from targets and corporate counter-activism all pose a danger (Meikle, 2002). Smith & Kollock warn that control over listservs by list owners or gatekeepers can lead to censorship, affect who can join a list, and risk censorship and the spread of inaccurate information. Another drawback is that discussion groups and listservs may discourage challenges to the information and conclusions drawn by members because they tend to be composed of like-minded people (Gurak, 1999). Furthermore, Diani (2001) cautions that most activists utilizing the Internet are most likely predisposed to the issues and are already interested in and involved with them. Thus, while the Internet has the potential to expand information and resources available to those

mobilizing for social change, it is questionable as to whether it serves as a tool to bring new people into the movement.

### *Cyberactivism in Practice*

The online international anti-war community is vast. It includes sites concerned with organizing protests outside US military bases, such as Germany's Resist the War, and UK-based online groups such as the Human Shields Project, which organized to send human shields from all over the world to Iraq. The multinational effort Iraq Body Count maintains a homepage to establish an independent and comprehensive public database of civilian deaths in Iraq that have resulted directly from military actions (Webb, 2003).

Websites such as the Institute for Global Communications (igc.org) serve as a gateway for people to quickly access alternative news or political analysis over the Internet, and search for information and websites of progressive organizations. The San Francisco-based Independent Media Institute (IMI), a public interest media company, has reinvigorated its online alternative news outlet, AlterNet.org, which streamlines the search for a wide range of independent news sources online.

The web-based anti-war network Why War is another leading outlet of cyber-activism, dedicated to activating a broad, global movement toward peace and justice. It delivers news, analysis, strategy and progressive insight to activists and potential activists. United for Peace & Justice encourages students to embrace democratic activism. The website supplies links to anti-war sites, updates on what students around the nation are doing to oppose the war, and lists anti-war resolutions that numerous universities have passed.

Criticism of the war is now, via the Internet, also coming directly from soldiers. Emails and chat rooms portray an alternative to the 'official' version (Franklin & Harris, 2003). Michael Moore, creator of *Fahrenheit 9/11* and labor/peace advocate, has made public several of the letters he received from troops in Iraq openly showcasing dissent among the ranks on his website and various listservs (Moore, 2004). Between 26 October and 1 November 2004 AlterNet also featured a series of profiles of Iraq war veterans that exposed the real risks for troops in Iraq. These sites urge veterans to form online organizations, such as Veterans for Common Sense, Operation Truth and Iraq Veterans Against the War to campaign to bring the soldiers home.

Through the WWW, families of troops are connecting at an unprecedented rate and this has helped to foster collective identity among concerned citizens. Many individuals who have historically aligned themselves with the Republican Party have recently changed positions due to the personal relevance of Bush's war (Span, 2004). Activist groups such as Bring Them Home Now, Military Families Speak Out and Mothers Against War are comprised of military families, veterans, active duty personnel and reservists. Their websites offer numerous links and news stories updating the situation of the troops on the ground and highlight the continuous threats that endanger them. These online communities also launch email campaigns and strategize to organize marches and teach-ins (Nieves, 2003).

Other groups proactively advocate alternatives to war. For example, Peaceful Tomorrows was founded by family members of 9/11 victims to promote effective, nonviolent solutions to terrorism and to acknowledge the common experience of all people similarly affected by violence worldwide (Online [peacefultomorrow.org](http://peacefultomorrow.org)). They advocate dialogue, education and consciousness-raising regarding civil liberties being lost in the US,



as well as US foreign policy. In an effort to increase respect for democracy and human rights they advocate multilateral approaches to uphold principles of international law.

ANSWER, which also formed immediately after the 9/11 attacks, promotes a similar philosophy. It is a coalition of hundreds of organizations and individuals across the US (most are members of the global justice movement) that seeks to promote mass action that opposes imperialist wars anywhere, occupation of any country, and the attack on civil liberties in the US. It insists on fundamental changes in political leadership in the US, arguing that both the Democratic and Republican parties represent 'the same banking and corporate elites that are committed to a strategy of global domination' (Online Answer.org).

By demanding unconditional withdrawal from Iraq, ANSWER sends a message to the Iraqi people that they respect the right of Iraqi citizens to determine their own destiny, and a message to US soldiers that '... their lives and dignity are too important to be used in the commission of war crimes or to serve as cannon fodder in a war that only benefits corporate and banking elite' (Online answer.org). They frame their message in simple humanistic terms: 'Bring the Troops Home Now' and 'End all Occupations'. In addition to organizing several national protests against the invasion of Iraq, ANSWER has also organized protests outside the offices of corporate contractors such as Bechtel and Halliburton, two of the largest US-based contractors now operating in Iraq (Hayden, 2004).

The philosophy and strategies of ANSWER demonstrate how the global justice movement is steadily solidifying in that globalization is creating common interests (peace, respect for environmental, worker and human rights) that transcend both national and interest-group boundaries. Chesters & Welsh (2001) elaborate on the strength of 'weak ties' (loose connections among activists in heterogeneous movements) which allow for a unity in diversity – enabling a diverse set of actors to engage with a common enemy. They argue that the various groups involved in the global justice movement, and the different perspectives and objectives of its members, in fact help to sustain a creative tension around the pursuit of an immediate common goal, while never losing sight of the struggle for the longer term objectives of the overall global movement. Through the convergence of the global justice and peace movements, the campaign against corporate power and the powerful international economic institutions has been accompanied by protests of US military interventions that safeguard the business interests of the elites in the most powerful countries.

The numerous anti-war protests and speaking tours, as well as other mobilizing tactics have been organized largely via the WWW through alternative online media sources, open-publishing newswires and activist websites that provide immediate, authentic grassroots coverage of protests. One of the most popular sites is the Independent Media Center (IMC), which was created during the 1999 WTO protest when thousands of activists recorded the events with personal cameras, video cameras, microphones and laptops (Smith, 2002). The day after the F15 protests, websites such as [www.wbai.org](http://www.wbai.org), [www.cableradio.co.uk/lovemusic/](http://www.cableradio.co.uk/lovemusic/) and the BBC's online outlet were among the providers of audio, video, slideshows and detailed reports of the international protests (Cohen, 2003). WBAI is an alternative FM radio station out of New York City that advertises itself as 'your peace and justice community radio ... to defuse tensions and create understanding among individuals, races, religions, and states' (Online WBAI.org). Love Music Radio is a British-based streaming radio outlet affiliated with the Stop the War Coalition that focuses



exclusively on broadcasting war rallies from across the globe. The organizational strategies and alternative forms of media covering events such as F15 showed how the Internet can inform and connect millions of people and how small-scale political groups with few resources can be quickly integrated and mobilized. Langman (2005, p. 28) states: 'the rapid mobilization, coordination, and size of these protests was a direct result of the Internet and the existence of a large number of global justice movements'.

The Internet and advanced communication technologies have also resulted in a fundamental shift in the mechanics of protests because mobilization can emerge from 'free-wheeling amorphous groups rather than top-down hierarchical ones' (Lee, 2003). Two key concepts promoted specifically on the Why War? website, and that are quintessential concepts of new social movements, are 'radical empathy' and 'swarming'. Radical empathy immerses the individual in the struggle of another in order to bridge the gap between 'us' and 'them' by sharing authentic life-experiences that document different aspects of the global peace movement. This enhances solidarity through a shared sense of morality and consciousness of human rights (Online Why War?.org). Chesters & Welsh (2002) note how the PGA 'engages citizens from around the world to decipher their individual experiences of globalization, forging these into shared meanings that can become the basis of recognizable needs, which then become the basis for political demands' (p. 22). Swarming, the main organizational tactic embraced by wired activists, involves the seemingly spontaneous appearance of anti-war crowds engaging in civil disobedience. The fusion of network communications and social networks as facilitated by the WWW has led to the emergence of so-called 'smart mobs' headed by organizers who strategize like virtual field commanders (Lee, 2003).

This works in physical as well as virtual reality. The phenomenon, by which amorphous groups of NGOs link online and can descend on a target, has been labeled an 'NGO swarm' by David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla in a recent RAND study. They argue that the swarm is incredibly effective because 'it has no central leadership or command structure, it is multi-headed, impossible to decapitate. And it can sting a victim to death' (cited in Brecher *et al.*, 2002). This has been an important tool in the globalization from below movement in that these networks lack the funds their opponents have readily at their disposal. Also, with so much information circulating and organizing happening instantaneously online, it is very difficult for political elites to effectively do what they do best when faced with public criticism – damage control.

This strategy was also evident on the ground when activists disrupted the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City, where many gathered to protest Bush's war on terrorism and the invasion of Iraq. Groups such as Counter Convention and Radical Reference acted as resource services providing protest tools and logistical aid to the activists (Scahill, 2004). Independent journalists and wired activists mobilized by using cell phone text messaging technology to coordinate a campaign of direct action and comprehensive news reporting, sending out action alerts, warnings, and news and announcements directly from the New York IMC.

Some of the most effective grassroots organizing in the peace movement developed exclusively online. MoveOn and Win Without War are the primary online anti-war organizations, both of which were born in cyberspace. Win Without War serves as an online umbrella organization that provides links to dozens of other related pro-peace coalitions and groups including MoveOn. In February 2003 it held one of its most prominent acts of online civil disobedience – a virtual march to protest the imminent

invasion of Iraq. Using email connections to coordinate and organize a sufficient protestor base, on 26 February, 200,000 individuals signed up and made more than 400,000 phone calls and sent 100,000 faxes to every senate office in the US with the message: DON'T ATTACK IRAQ! (Online, winwithoutwar.org). Every member of the US Senate also received a stream of emails, clogging up virtual mailboxes in Washington (Harris, 2003).

The website for MoveOn.org has become the epicenter of peace activism and operates at a fundamentally grassroots level. In the wake of 9/11, Eli Pariser created an online petition, 9-11peace.org, which urged moderation and restraint in responding to the terrorist acts. It exploded in popularity and Pariser soon heard from Wes Boyd, the founder of MoveOn.org, who urged him to merge the two websites. MoveOn now has over 1.4 million members, plus 700,000 outside the country (Kuttner, 2003). As a grassroots virtual community, it asks members to volunteer their time, ideas and money to effect political change. The site distributes petitions, email action alerts and information to coordinate the organization of activism to wage peace and fundraising to influence electoral politics. The large numbers of small contributions allows MoveOn to represent the public interest, as donations are made by average people and not by special interest contributions from corporate PACs (Political Action Committees).

MoveOn is a quintessential grassroots mobilizing effort. Pariser explains: 'In a sense part of MoveOn's attraction is that it aims for normal people, not just activists, and engages them successfully' (Online AlterNet.org). MoveOn attempts to combine Net activism with meaningful political engagement. During the 2004 US presidential election, it sent emails to members to help them identify ways they could help swing elections, encouraging them to write postcards to voters, distribute flyers and to have house parties for nominees who spoke out against the Iraq war. The election marked the greatest mobilization of progressive political activism in the nation's history. For the first time, a grassroots insurgency and independent PACs raised enough money to match Bush's corporate-backed finances (Solomon, 2004).

In conjunction with Win Without War, members of MoveOn in every state petitioned their congressional representatives to investigate the government's controversial claims about the invasion of Iraq and to continue with the inspections for weapons of mass destruction. The two groups also linked efforts to catalyze thousands of candlelight vigils around the world in opposition to the impending invasion (Kuttner, 2003). In less than one week members raised \$37,000 over the Internet to run an ad in *The New York Times* on 11 December 2002. It stated: 'By alienating and infuriating allies through unilateral action in Iraq, the US could throw the success of the campaign against terrorism into jeopardy' (Goldberg, 2002).

Once the invasion was underway, MoveOn organized a massive transnational email drive to enlist signatures for a citizens' declaration which read:

As a US-led invasion of Iraq begins, we the undersigned citizens of many countries, reaffirm our commitment to addressing international conflicts through the rule of law and the United Nations. By joining together across countries and continents, we have emerged as a new forum for peace. As we grieve for the victims of this war, we pledge to redouble our efforts to put an end to the Bush Administration's doctrine of preemptive attack and the reckless use of military power.

In the aftermath of the 1,000th death of an American soldier in Iraq, MoveOn organized an open letter that was sent to President Bush demanding to know when and how he planned

to end the war and bring the soldiers home. After the 2004 vice presidential debate, MoveOn listed a number of false statements Vice President Dick Cheney had made during the debate on their website, the most egregious being the purported link between the Al Qaeda network and Saddam Hussein. The email was distributed on its listserv and website and provided a letter-to-the editor model toolkit that allowed activists to find their local newspaper and submit a letter online. After the first presidential debate, hundreds of thousands of people had written letters criticizing Bush's lack of accountability or remorse for mistakes surrounding the Iraq war (Online MoveOn.org).

MoveOn has also made concerted efforts to act outside of the online political process. When theaters across the US were being pressured by right wing groups to bar *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Moore's controversial film that questions the ties between the Bush and Bin Laden families and the rush to war, MoveOn asked members to pledge to see the film on opening night with other members in order to send a message to theater owners that the public supports Moore's message of peace (Online MoveOn.org). It furthermore invited viewers of the movie to meet afterwards in house parties to share their analysis of the film and to plan political action to defeat Bush (Online MoveOn.org). There were approximately 4,000 parties held across the US and at each, on a laptop computer, Moore spoke to the crowd about his movie and his hope that they would each bring at least five nonvoters to the polls for the November election (Online MoveOn.org).

Using grassroots mobilization and sources of funding, MoveOn also created several advertisements against the war. Their updated 'Daisy Ad', originally a famous 1960s spot warning of the dangers of nuclear holocaust right before the 1964 election, warned of the consequences of an American attack in the Middle East and urged President Bush to 'let the inspections work' (Online CNN.com; Online MoveOn). The 'Bush in 30 Seconds' ad contest was designed to encourage grassroots creativity and political involvement, while critiquing the policies of Bush (Online MoveOn.org). Michael Stipe of REM, Moby, Jack Black, Michael Moore and several other celebrities served on the panel for the contest that culminated in an awards show in New York City to raise funds for other anti-Bush television ads in swing states. The winning ad, titled 'Child's Pay', lamented the plight of the children who will shoulder the burden of financing the war on terrorism (Online MoveOn.org). When CBS refused to air the ad during the 2004 Super Bowl, the station was heavily criticized and activists jammed switchboards for an entire week (Darman, 2004). MoveOn received a groundswell of support as charges of censorship were levied against the network, and it succeeded in having the ad aired on CNN during the Super Bowl Halftime Show. MoveOn members also created the 'Real People' ad campaign that featured testimonials by Republicans explaining why they were crossing traditional party lines to vote for Senator John Kerry in the upcoming presidential election (Online MoveOn.org). The website provided a link that allowed members to view the ads and vote on the one they liked best. Members contributed over \$600,000 via the website to air the ads in key swing states (Online MoveOn.org).

In an effort to regroup and rethink strategies after Bush's reelection, MoveOn invited members to organize and/or attend a house party to discuss new ideas, strategies and leadership. Upholding its dedication to grassroots mobilization, its email informed members that the best solutions will come 'not from "experts" and political consultants but from all of us thinking together . . . we've always believed that groups of people are greater than the sum of their parts' (Online MoveOn.org). As with other house parties, the host was asked to provide a space to meet and a speaker phone, or a computer with Internet

access and speakers so that all parties could be linked via a network conference call online to view the event and participate in the discussion.

## Conclusion

In response to the invasion of Iraq and the 'war on terror', activists across a broad spectrum of groups and organizations have engaged in international collective political struggles in novel and traditional ways. Diverse actors have taken advantage of new opportunities due to the interconnectedness associated with globalization and new communication technologies to forge a global collective identity, in which issues are framed under the rubric of global standards of justice and a shared oppositional consciousness in accordance with international norms.

Under the POS paradigm, success is understood as the ability to exploit openings in the political structure. This framework offers some key insights into the dynamics and organizational structure of the contemporary peace mobilization. By taking advantage of rifts among political elites, strained state legitimation in several countries, and rising public anxieties, a multilateral approach has showed some success in changing public opinion, influencing policymakers, and has thus made inroads into undermining the infrastructure that supports the war.

As theories of NSMs highlight, collective identities and grassroots mobilization, in conjunction with an awareness of structural level issues, are critical to understanding the re-emergence of the peace movement. This analysis specifically supports Diani's suggestion that an examination of meso-level structures of collective action, meaning the networks forged in protest events and in cyberspace, is crucial in that it is here we find the link between macro-level (structural) and micro-level (emotional) explanations of collective action. The networks and coalitions of the peace movement are built on an identity politics in a global formation, with a demand that values such as dignity, compassion and a sense of sharing a common fate be considered in international relations.

The framing perspective views successful social movements as ones that define a problem in a way that can sustain collective identity among participants and attract new recruits. Framing has been a crucial tactic in the struggle in the peace movement. In this international campaign the issues of global justice and peace have been framed to sustain a sense of collective identity, not necessarily through direct relationships or direct experience, but through a sense of shared identity that is in many cases imagined rather than real. By framing issues in terms of international law, in both concrete and virtual communities, weak ties among participants fermented emotional bonds and feelings of indignation and of moral shock, linking grievances to mainstream beliefs and values to strengthen the resolve of participants and appealing to third parties.

The resource mobilization theoretical framework alerts our attention to the importance of cyberactivism as a new repertoire at the disposal of activists in contemporary social justice campaigns. This perspective, together with NSM theory, helps us understand the importance of how new communication technologies are altering the nature of communication, social relations and the political process. As this analysis demonstrates, virtual public spheres and the new technological environment have contributed greatly to contentious politics. They have facilitated inter-networked movements organized as flows and created ways for participants in the struggle to cooperate at the grassroots level.

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**Victoria Carty** is assistant professor at Chapman University. Her interests include social movements, political economy, and Latin America.

**Jake Onyett** is a graduate candidate in the department of government at the University of Texas at Austin. His research interests include international relations and comparative politics.